



The Economic and Social Future, Albert Camus

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Kabylia has too many people and not enough grain. It consumes more than it produces. Its labor, compensated with ridiculously low wages, is not sufficient to pay for what it consumes. Its émigrés, whose numbers dwindle year after year, can no longer make up for this trade deficit.

If we want to return Kabylia to prosperity, save its people from famine, and do our duty toward the Kabyle people, we must therefore change everything about the region's economy.

Common sense suggests that if Kabylia consumes more than it produces, we must first try to increase the purchasing power of the Kabyle people so that the wages of their labor can compensate for the shortages of their production. We must also try to reduce the gap between imports and exports by increasing the latter as much as possible.

These are the main lines of a policy that everyone agrees is essential. The two aspects of this policy must not be separated, however. There is no way to raise the standard of living in Kabylia without paying people more and paying more for their products. It is not just humanity that is trampled underfoot when people are paid six francs a day for their work, it is also logic. And the low prices paid for Kabylia's cash crops are an affront not only to justice but also to common sense.

In this essay I will review a number of the constant themes of this inquiry. Kabyle labor is paid as it is only because of unemployment and the latitude allowed to employers. Wages will therefore not become

normal until unemployment has been reduced, competition in the labor market has been eliminated, and tariffs have been restored.

Until labor inspectors are actually dispatched to Kabylia, it is desirable that the state employ as many workers as possible. Monitoring of the market will then be automatic. Unemployment must be reduced in three stages: first by a program of public works, second by the establishment of job training programs, and third by the organization of emigration.

Public works programs are of course part of every demagogic political platform. But the essence of demagoguery is that programs are proposed but never implemented. Here, the goal is the opposite.

To undertake public works in a country that has no need of them is indeed a waste of public funds. But need I point out how sorely Kabylia lacks for roads and water? Not only would a major public works program eliminate the bulk of unemployment and raise wages to a normal level; it would also yield surplus economic value for Kabylia, and sooner or later we will reap the benefits.

This policy has already been initiated. Where it was systematically pursued in the commune of Port-Gueydon and the douar of Beni-Yenni, the results were immediately apparent. Port-Gueydon now boasts of 17 new fountains and a number of new roads. Beni-Yenni is one of the wealthiest douars in Kabylia, and its workers are paid 22 francs a day.

The major criticism that one can make, however, is that these experiments remain isolated. And large amounts of public funds have been dispersed in small subsidies that have had virtually no effect.

Government officials regularly ask, “Where are we to find the money?” But for now, at least, the problem is not to come up with new funding but just to use money that has already been appropriated.

Nearly 600 million francs have been directed toward Kabylia. It is now 10 days since I tried to describe the horrifying results. What is needed now is an intelligent and comprehensive plan that can be systematically implemented. We want nothing to do with politics as usual, with half measures and compromises, small handouts and scattered subsidies.

Kabylia wants the opposite of business as usual: namely, smart and generous policy. It will take vision to pull together all the appropriated sums, scattered subsidies, and wasted charity if Kabylia is to be saved by the Kabyles themselves, if the dignity of these peasants is to be restored through useful labor paid at a just wage.

We managed to come up with the money to give the countries of Europe nearly 400 billion francs, all of which is now gone forever. It seems unlikely that we cannot come up with one-hundredth that amount to improve the lot of people whom we have not yet made French, to be sure, but from whom we demand the sacrifices of French citizens.

Furthermore, wages are so low only because the Kabyles do not qualify for protection under existing labor laws. That is where job training for both industrial and agricultural workers comes in. There are occupational training schools in Kabylia. In Michelet, there is a school for blacksmiths, carpenters, and masons. It has trained good workers, some of whom live in Michelet itself. But the school can train only a dozen students at a time, and that is not enough.

There are also schools in arboriculture, like the one in Mechtras, but it graduates only 30 students every two years. This is an experiment, not an institution.

These efforts must now be expanded, and every center must be equipped with a vocational training school to train people whose skills and desire to assimilate are proverbial.

All of Kabylia's problems are related, moreover. There is no better illustration of this than the fact that there is no point training skilled workers if they cannot find jobs. For now, however, all the jobs are in metropolitan France. So no training policy will work unless something is done to help Kabyles emigrate.

To that end, the first thing to do is to simplify the formalities, and the second is to assist with emigration. Right now it is possible to help Kabyles find jobs in farming. I am not speaking of the offers coming from the Niger Office. There is no point sending Kabyle peasants to die for the benefit of private firms in a lethal foreign environment. But the colonial authorities could still distribute nearly 200,000 hectares of land in Algeria if they chose to.

In Kabylia itself, near Boghni, an experiment of this type is under way in the Bou-Mani estates. Meanwhile, people are fleeing the south of France, and we had to bring in tens of thousands of Italians to colonize our own soil.

Today, those Italians are returning home. There is no reason why Kabyles cannot colonize this region. We are told that "Kabyles are too attached to their mountains to leave them." My answer is first of all that there are presently 50,000 Kabyles in France who have already left those same mountains. In addition, I will mention the response of one

Kabyle peasant to whom I put the question: “You are forgetting that we do not have anything to eat. We have no choice.”

I anticipate the next objection: “But these Kabyles will eventually abandon their land and return home.” This may well be true, but is there anyone who does not see that Kabyles have been coming to France generation after generation and that no landowner will leave his land until he has sold it to someone younger than himself?

In any case, these few measures should suffice to raise the wages of Kabyle workers to a decent level. And it bears repeating that the sums already appropriated should suffice to get the project under way. The policy will begin to yield benefits when its extension becomes inevitable. But the fruits of such a policy cannot truly be reaped unless the prices paid for Kabylia’s agricultural production are also raised at the same time.

Once again, common sense points the way toward a constructive policy. Although the region does produce a small amount of grain, its main cash crops are figs and olives. Since it is futile to try to counter the forces of nature, attention should therefore be directed to these products in the hope of achieving equilibrium with local consumption.

Unless I am missing something, there are only three ways to earn more with a given product. First, one can try to increase the quantity produced. Second, one can try to improve the quality. And third, one can try to stop the market price from falling. The second and third methods often go together, and all three are applicable in Kabylia.

Increasing the production of figs and olives should be considered, and it is also worth considering whether complementary products such as cherries and carobs might also prove viable. Both experiments have been tried in the commune of Port-Gueydon, and these should be treated as constructive examples.

In 1938, the commune assisted in the planting of 1,000 new saplings. This year, 10,000 to 15,000 trees will be planted. And all of this has been done without supplementary appropriations. The Société Indigène de Prévoyance guaranteed loans to pay for the planting, and shoots were delivered to the fellahin (peasants) who asked for them. They had the opportunity to observe the quality and yield of these plants in test groves planted on communal land.

As with the fig tree, which is planted when saplings are two years old but does not yield fruit until it is five, the fellahin will, for the first five years, pay only interest on the minimal capital required to purchase the saplings. The interest rate is only 4 percent. After five years, the tree begins to produce figs, and the Kabyle peasant then has five additional years to pay off the loan.

To give you an idea of the return on investment, I should add that even if only one-third of the new trees become productive (which is a conservative estimate), the fellah will still come out ahead, and his success will have cost the state practically nothing. No comment is necessary. If this experiment is aggressively expanded to other areas, the results will soon be obvious.

When it comes to improving existing products and raising their market price, the task is immense. Here I will discuss only the key elements: setting up drying houses to improve the quality of dried figs and

establishing cooperatives to produce olive oil. The traditional methods of Kabyle agriculture are not well suited to increasing yields. The usual pruning of olive trees, which resembles an amputation, the unsystematic removal of saplings, the racks used to dry figs on rooftops or under carob trees that leave the fruit vulnerable to parasites—none of these things enhances the quality of the final product.

Many communes have therefore experimented with drying houses. The most instructive of these experiments were carried out in Azazga and Sidi-Aïch. In Azazga, the rational methods implemented by state-sponsored advisers increased the price of the final product by 120 percent the first year and 80 percent the second year. In Sidi-Aïch, figs from the drying house sold for an average of 260 francs per quintal compared with 190 for native figs.

In Azazga, 120 fellahin participated in the experiment by bringing their figs to the drying house, and they earned 180,000 francs in revenue. After initial resistance, the majority of fellahin therefore embraced the innovation. A private cooperative is planned in Temda, to be managed by the producers themselves. This is likely to be an image of Kabylia's future.

Setting up olive oil cooperatives has been a more difficult process. Some administrators oppose the idea owing to opposition from lowland settlers, who prefer to purchase olives at low cost rather than high-priced olive oil. In addition, middlemen and brokers would stand to lose under the new system and therefore oppose it. But Kabyle farmers need credit, for which they turn to these same middlemen, who lend them money in exchange for a claim on their future production.

This obstacle can be overcome, however, if olive oil cooperatives are associated with a credit union that could fill the role of middleman. A final argument that is sometimes heard insists that Kabyle farmers would nevertheless continue to turn to other middlemen for needed cash. But this is an argument that is raised against every proposed innovation, and it has always been indefensible.

Unfortunately, the methods used by Kabyle farmers allow them to harvest olives only once every two years. A more rational system needs to be imposed, and it is certain that output would then be close to doubled. European factories have increased their yield, but the methods they use ensure that the oil produced has an acid content of at least 1.5 to 2 percent and therefore has an unpleasant taste.

Finally, these policies can succeed only if additional steps are taken to deal with other issues. Housing, for example, could be based on the model established by the Loucheur Law.¹ The beneficiaries of housing assistance could contribute by providing land, labor, and materials (nearly every Kabyle owns a plot of land). There are also grounds for reconsidering the way in which communal revenues are shared between the European and native population and for asking Europeans to make the necessary sacrifices.

These policies would revive the real Kabylia. The dreadful misery of the region would at last be alleviated and compensated. I know that money is needed to achieve these goals, but I say again, let us begin by making better use of the money that has already been appropriated, because what is missing is not so much money, perhaps, as commitment. Nothing great has ever been accomplished without courage and lucidity. If these policies are to succeed, it is not enough to hope for improvement now and then: our determination must be constant and focused.

I know that many will object “that there is no reason why the colony and colonists should pay.” And I agree. So let us not wait for the colonists to act, because we cannot be sure that they will. But if you say that it is up to metropolitan France to step in, then I agree with you for two reasons. First, the status quo proves that a system that divorces Algeria from France is bad for France. And second, when the interests of Algeria and France coincide, then you can be sure that hearts and minds will soon follow.

1. The Loucheur Law of July 13, 1928, provided state aid for low-cost housing.—Trans.

The end